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NAVIGATING ADVOCACY IN SHRINKING DEMOCRATIC SPACES

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Research Report

Challenges, Strategies, and Resilience Among Child-Focused NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe

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Introduction

This research report was commissioned by ECPAT International as part of a project named *Child safeguarding is a matter of us all*.

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The research primarily aimed to characterize the civil society sector focused on children within the shrinking democratic space in Hungary and the Central and Eastern European region. We were interested in how the restrictive policy environment affects the capacity of NGOs to advocate for children's rights, and we also wanted to identify the challenges and coping strategies of NGOs. In formulating the research questions, we primarily focused on the situation in Hungary and identified four main questions.

1)   What does advocacy mean for organizations that work with children?
2)   How can the Hungarian NGO sector that focuses on children be described?
3)   What is the nature of the relationship between the state and civil society in the context of child protection?
4)   How predictable is the maintenance and operation of NGOs in a shrinking political space?

Although this research focuses primarily on the Hungarian situation, the findings and recommendations are presented in a manner that can provide valuable insights for other countries facing similar challenges. The report aims to serve as a resource for NGOs, policymakers, and stakeholders across the EU by highlighting both the obstacles and possible solutions for sustaining child rights advocacy in an increasingly restrictive landscape.

Methodology

The research can be divided into two main parts. In the desk research phase of this study, we reviewed and analyzed a range of scholarly studies, theoretical frameworks, and reports on child rights advocacy and democracy. Using a selected democracy theory, countries were categorized into three political types based on their democratic structures and practices. This approach provided a systematic framework for understanding the impact of political contexts on the advocacy work of NGOs. The methodology enabled the identification of patterns and challenges unique to each category, informing a nuanced analysis of child rights advocacy in shrinking democracies.

Semi structured interviews were conducted with representatives of NGOs that work with children in the Hungarian part of the research. In addition, interviews were conducted with researchers examining the relationship between democratic institutions and advocacy, as well as representatives of donor organizations providing support in the region. These experts

were professionals working in other countries in the region, including Austria, Germany, and Poland. In the selection of the Hungarian interviewees, we aimed for inclusiveness by trying to cover the diverse NGO sector as much as possible. We approached both smaller and larger organizations with an international background, Hungarian-only organizations, those providing both general and specific services, and advocacy organizations as well as civil organizations that are more actively involved in performing state functions and receive funding for this purpose. During the research, seven interviews were conducted[1] in Hungary. To complement this, we also compiled a brief questionnaire containing the four main questions of our research, which was sent to additional organizations and received a total of four responses. The interviews were conducted between 27 September and 9 October 2024. The average length of each interview was about fifty minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. After the transcription process was completed, the audio recordings were deleted. The research report was developed through a thematic analysis of interviews and questionnaire responses, presenting the results according to the four primary research questions.

Due to the sensitivity of the research topic, particular attention must be paid to the ethical aspects of the research. All participants in the research have been informed that participation is voluntary and anonymous and that they may withdraw or discontinue their involvement at any time. The data we collect will be used solely for research purposes. We prioritize anonymity because information from interviewees may expose them to vulnerabilities. To protect confidentiality, we ensure the anonymity of interviewees and organizations in the research report. Consequently, any information that could identify either individuals or organizations has been removed. The quality of this research report remains unaffected, as our primary focus was on identifying broader correlations, best practices that extend beyond individual solutions, and insights specific to local communities. These elements were effectively integrated into the report, even within the constraints of the research methodology.

The recommendations presented in the last chapter of this report are grounded in a multi-faceted research approach that included in-depth interviews with representatives of civil society organizations, a focus group discussion with representatives from a donor organization operating in the CEE region, and consultations with experts directly engaged in the research topic. Insights from civil society representatives provided a nuanced understanding of the practical challenges and strategies used in advocacy work, especially in politically restrictive environments. The focus group with donor representatives contributed valuable perspectives on funding strategies and support mechanisms that could enhance NGO resilience. Additionally, interviews with subject matter experts helped contextualize the broader trends affecting advocacy efforts, particularly in the context of shrinking democratic spaces. These combined sources of information ensured that the recommendations are both evidence-based and directly relevant to the needs of organizations operating in this challenging landscape.

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[1] We sent out eight interview requests; seven received positive responses, while one went unanswered.

Defining *advocacy*

Advocacy, as a concept, is complex and lacks a universally accepted definition, which presents unique challenges, especially in countries where democratic freedoms are restricted and alternative ways of advocacy need to be used. In the field of human, therefore child rights, advocacy is often defined as the active promotion of rights and justice, using research, education, and public pressure to hold authorities accountable. Scholars such as Cohen, De la Vega, and Watson (2001) emphasize the ethical dimensions of advocacy, particularly its role in amplifying the voices of marginalized or vulnerable groups. This variability in definitions reflects advocacy's adaptability to different contexts, but also highlights the difficulties in establishing a single, comprehensive definition. As such, advocacy is shaped by its goals, the actors involved, and the sociopolitical constraints in which it operates, making it a powerful yet challenging tool to standardize across disciplines and cultures.

Building on this, UNICEF (2020) provides a practical framework for understanding advocacy in the context of child rights. It defines advocacy as a process aimed at influencing governments, policymakers, and stakeholders to take actions that promote the realization of children's rights. This process can encompass a wide array of activities, from influencing legislation and budgets to redesigning services and institutional practices. Advocacy efforts range from small-scale initiatives, like improving conditions at a single children's home, to broad, systemic changes, such as raising the age of criminal responsibility. Importantly, Nonetheless, the essence of advocacy lies in challenging and changing mindsets, enabling children to express their voices, proposing legal reforms, and holding decision-makers accountable to international human rights standards.

Michael Edwards complements this perspective by framing advocacy as "a process that challenges social, political, and economic power structures by promoting alternative policies, fostering new ideas, and supporting marginalized groups in building their own capabilities" (Edwards, 2002). Like UNICEF, Edwards emphasizes the transformative potential of advocacy, particularly its dual focus on influencing policy and empowering communities. Together, these perspectives underline the multifaceted nature of advocacy: a tool that bridges grassroots engagement and systemic change, while navigating the complexities of cultural, linguistic, and political landscapes. By linking theory with practice, both UNICEF and Edwards illuminate the dynamic and flexible character of advocacy, reinforcing its critical role in advancing justice and rights.

When it comes to the Hungarian language, various terms can convey aspects of advocacy, such as *érdekvédelem* (interest protection), *képviselet* (representation), and *támogatás* (support), however, none of them fully encapsulate the broad, multifaceted nature of advocacy as understood in English. The field of child rights advocacy, in particular, exemplifies this complexity. Children's rights advocates work in diverse ways: providing direct support to at-risk children, engaging in education, lobbying for policy changes, and collaborating with decision-makers, institutions, and other stakeholders. Not having an exact Hungarian definition of advocacy offers NGOs the opportunity of individual approaches and flexibility in applying advocacy to their work. This allows organizations to tailor their strategies to specific causes, adapt to unique contexts, and foster creative, diverse methods

of influencing change. However, this lack of clarity creates challenges, as it can lead to confusion about the nature and scope of advocacy efforts, complicating the identification of allies, building networks, and establishing unified goals. Without a shared understanding, collaboration and communication within and across organizations may become fragmented and less effective.

1. Child rights advocacy in challenging democratic landscapes

This report focuses on child rights advocacy in specific countries where democratic principles are either compromised or at risk. These countries - Hungary, Bulgaria, Turkey, Serbia, the Netherlands, Poland, and Austria - were selected for their unique political and social landscapes and their varying degrees of democratic health. While some of these nations are currently facing significant restrictions on democratic freedoms, others continue to operate with relatively robust democratic institutions, yet still grapple with challenges to child rights. This analysis seeks to uncover how the nature of democracy in each country influences the strategies, limitations, and outcomes of child rights advocacy efforts.

This paper explores how Hungarian NGOs' adaptive approaches to child rights advocacy reflect broader regional trends among organizations in democratizing or semi-authoritarian countries. Lacking a precise term for "advocacy," Hungarian NGOs blend individualized support, rights-based education, and collaboration with families and institutions, emphasizing long-term, culturally sensitive support. Expanding this analysis, the paper examines how NGOs in other nations facing democratic backsliding - such as Bulgaria, Turkey, Serbia and Poland - use similar adaptive strategies to navigate restrictive environments, often turning to grassroots efforts, international partnerships, and digital campaigns. In contrast, more stable democracies like Austria and the Netherlands provide examples of advocacy supported by greater access to public information and collaborative government relationships.

The paper concludes with a comparative analysis of these democratic contexts and offers recommendations to strengthen child rights advocacy. These suggestions aim to help NGOs operate effectively within restrictive political conditions, enhance public awareness, and secure partnerships that maximize impact in diverse democratic environments.

General overview

The classification of countries based on their governmental systems and forms of rule is highly complex and continuously evolving. Various classification systems use different criteria to categorize countries, such as democratic, authoritarian, or hybrid regimes, and these categorizations are subject to change due to political and societal shifts.

In this paper, the countries under analysis are categorized using the framework provided by *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes* by Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics, which offers a comprehensive lens for understanding the political, economic, and social dynamics

that define countries. The decision to use this theoretical framework is rooted in its detailed analysis of hybrid regimes and democratic backsliding. This theory provides a nuanced understanding of how political systems transition between democracy and autocracy, often manipulating institutions to suppress civil society and advocacy efforts. Its structured typologies and emphasis on regime dynamics make it particularly suited for examining the systematic erosion of democratic principles and the specific challenges faced by advocacy groups in constrained environments. This approach enables a deeper examination of how political structures shape child rights advocacy in some countries, taking into account the varying levels of democracy, media freedom, and civil liberties. By categorizing political systems - ranging from competitive authoritarianism to liberal democracies - it becomes possible to assess how different governance models influence the ability of NGOs to protect and promote children's rights.

The selected countries represent various stages of democratic regression and span a broad spectrum of political contexts. For instance, Hungary and Turkey, as described by Magyar and Madlovics (2022), are shifting towards authoritarianism, while Austria and the Netherlands still adhere to the criteria of liberal democracies. However, recent parliamentary events and legislative changes in Austria and the Netherlands (Adler, 2023) underscore that even stable democracies face risks of democratic backsliding, such as restrictive policies toward asylum-seekers. While this paper highlights Austria and the Netherlands as positive examples of liberal democracies with governments that support NGO-led advocacy, it is crucial to acknowledge potential risks to human rights advocacy in the coming years.[2] The evolving political landscapes, even in seemingly stable democracies, emphasize the need for vigilance and adaptability in advocacy strategies to safeguard children's rights and broader human rights frameworks.

1.1 Stable liberal democracies (the Netherlands, Austria)

Stable liberal democracies like the Netherlands and Austria are characterized by strong democratic values and robust legal systems that emphasize human rights advocacy. These nations have well-established legal protections for individual and minority rights, supported by independent judicial systems and consistent enforcement. At this point, civil society remains active, with NGOs and human rights advocates generally able to operate freely and often engaging in collaboration with the government. However, challenges such as the high number of asylum-seekers and migrants and certain governmental decisions continue to impact daily life, highlighting areas where further progress is needed. These countries also play a prominent role in international human rights advocacy through organizations like the EU and UN. High standards of transparency and accountability further strengthen their democratic frameworks, enabling advocacy efforts to flourish effectively.

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[2] Recent political developments in Austria and the Netherlands highlight emerging risks to democratic stability. In Austria, the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) has gained significant traction, advocating for restrictive policies on immigration and asylum seekers, which could marginalize vulnerable groups, including children (Adler, 2023). Similarly, in the Netherlands, the electoral success of the Party for Freedom (PVV), known for its nationalist and anti-immigration stance, raises concerns about potential shifts in policy that may undermine inclusive child welfare frameworks. These trends, while not indicative of outright democratic regression, signal the need for heightened awareness and proactive efforts to protect human rights advocacy and maintain democratic values.

1.1.1 Netherlands

As a liberal democracy, the Netherlands exemplifies strong protections for democratic freedoms, such as freedom of speech, press, and civil association (Freedom House, 2023). This democratic stability enables NGOs and child rights advocates to operate openly and collaborate directly with governmental and educational institutions to address systemic child welfare issues. Dutch advocacy efforts benefit from accessible public information and a strong tradition of social welfare, which empowers NGOs to advocate effectively across a range of issues, including child protection, mental health, and educational rights (Kriesi, 2014).

With minimal governmental restrictions, NGOs can focus on both direct intervention and public awareness campaigns without fear of censorship. Moreover, the Netherlands' emphasis on participatory governance allows child advocacy groups to influence policy through formal channels, such as public consultations and advisory roles within governmental bodies (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004). This system encourages child rights NGOs to promote progressive policies, such as the Children's Ombudsman initiative, which holds institutions accountable and provides a platform for children's voices in governance (UNICEF Netherlands, 2022).

1.1.2 Austria

Similarly, Austria operates as a liberal democracy, aiming to protect freedom of speech and an independent judiciary that supports transparency and public access to information (Diamond, 1999). Austrian child rights advocates benefit from this environment, enabling them to work openly with local and national governments on policy improvements. Child rights organizations are actively involved in policy advisory boards, allowing them to shape laws directly related to child protection and education (Sedelmeier, 2014).

Austria's commitment to international human rights standards further strengthens child advocacy efforts, as organizations can collaborate with international bodies to bolster local programs and integrate best practices. NGOs are able to utilize data from public sources, including health and educational statistics, to inform targeted initiatives, such as mental health services in schools (Amnesty International, 2021).

Efforts to disseminate and raise awareness about children's rights in Austria have been multifaceted, focusing on public education and engagement. The Children's Rights Monitoring Board emphasizes promoting a child-friendly society and fostering public understanding of children's rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been published in accessible formats and distributed widely to schools and institutions. Campaigns like the 25th-anniversary video competition and regional awards for exemplary projects further integrate these rights into public consciousness and education systems (*Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2018*).

Experts and NGOs working on child rights advocacy in liberal democracies can focus on strengthening collaborations with governments to ensure policy alignment with human rights objectives, as these systems typically support constructive engagement. Experts should prioritize impact measurement, monitoring and evaluation of the impact of their own work as well as legal frameworks on children's rights. These processes provide transparency and help identify areas where policies and programs may not be achieving their intended

outcomes. They also enable governments, civil society, and other stakeholders to make data-driven decisions, adjust strategies, and ensure that the rights and needs of children are being addressed comprehensively. By fostering a culture of evaluation, liberal democracies can strengthen the protection and promotion of children's rights while maintaining public trust in democratic institutions. Building strong coalitions among NGOs can amplify their influence on international platforms. Additionally, leveraging public education campaigns to raise awareness about rights issues ensures broader societal support for advocacy initiatives.

1.2 Post-communist democracies with challenges (Poland, Bulgaria, Serbia)

Post-Communist democracies, such as Poland, Bulgaria, and Serbia, face significant challenges that impact human rights advocacy despite having transitioned to democracy. Although these countries may have human rights protections enshrined in law, enforcement is often inconsistent, and certain rights, such as LGBTQ+ rights and media freedom, are either less rigorously protected or under threat. Civil society, while active in many cases, faces bureaucratic hurdles, limited funding, and even government harassment, all of which constrain its effectiveness. Judicial independence is also often compromised by political influence, making it more difficult for advocacy groups to seek legal redress. Furthermore, while some of these countries engage in international human rights advocacy, they often fall short of meeting these standards domestically, with some even limiting their international commitments when political agendas are at stake.

1.2.1 Poland

Although Poland has democratic structures, it faces challenges regarding the independence of the judiciary and press freedom, which has led some analyses to assess that its system is approaching that of pseudo-democracies (Diamond, 2002). Reforms within the judiciary and increased government influence over the media have resulted in subtler forms of censorship, which have indirectly impacted civil organizations working on children's rights (Sedelmeier, 2014). Under the leadership of the PiS (Law and Justice) party, the operating environment for civil organizations in Poland has narrowed, particularly in the fields of human rights and child protection.

A law passed in 2020, which restricted foreign funding for civil organizations, sparked significant criticism. Both Polish and international analysts have interpreted this legislation as an attempt to limit independent civil society activities. Such laws imposed stricter reporting requirements on organizations receiving foreign donations, especially those that might be critical of the government (BTI, 2024). Hungary had previously passed similar legislation, which served as an inspiration for PiS in its efforts to reform and reframe the functioning of democratic institutions.

In response to these restrictions, Polish civil organizations have built coalitions with international partners and utilized EU-based legal mechanisms to advance child rights reforms (Amnesty International, 2021). It remains unclear how the change in government in 2023 (with PiS moving to the opposition) will impact democratic institutions and their

functioning, and to what extent Donald Tusk's government will fulfill its related campaign promises.

1.2.2 Serbia and Bulgaria

Bulgaria moved from closed authoritarianism to liberal democracy post-1989, while Serbia only transitioned from closed authoritarianism to a more democratic system under Milošević, post-2000 (Magyar & Madlovics, 2022). In both countries, child-welfare NGOs play an active role in advocacy, focusing largely on institutional advocacy. Although these organizations participate in government-led forums and provide input on child welfare issues, they are not formally integrated into the policy-making process. This independence allows them to maintain the ability to critique government policies and actions without constraints, however, the ultimate goal of having an impact may not be reached through collaborations with the government. A significant portion of their support comes from international organizations, which enables them to produce critical monitoring reports that are submitted to European Union (EU) and United Nations (UN) agencies. These NGOs also engage in transactional activism and participate in transnational networks to promote their policy proposals and gain external support (Filipova, 2015).

A key observation of Filipova (2015) is that many of these NGOs combine advocacy with service provision, demonstrating that the two activities can coexist and strengthen each other. However, the reliance on state funding for service provision creates potential risks for their independence. If international funding were to decrease, it could compromise both their advocacy capacity and their autonomy. The sustainability of their advocacy efforts, therefore, depends on maintaining a diverse range of funding sources. While service provision grants these NGOs better access to government consultations, it also limits their influence in the policy-making process, as their reach is generally confined to direct beneficiaries. Consequently, while these NGOs are able to participate in policy discussions, their capacity to drive substantial change is limited. To strengthen their political leverage, these organizations may need to focus more on public advocacy, as expertise alone might not be sufficient to achieve significant influence in policy development.

1.3 Shifting towards authoritarianism

Countries like Turkey and Hungary, which are moving towards authoritarianism based on the theory of Magyar and Madlovics (2022), often adopt restrictive human rights policies to consolidate power and suppress opposition. These regimes typically limit freedom of expression, curbing media freedom and targeting journalists and activists with harassment. Civil society faces severe obstacles, with NGOs encountering legal threats or forced closures. The judiciary, influenced by political powers, loses its independence, preventing citizens from seeking justice. Additionally, these governments may reject international human rights standards, undermining efforts for external oversight, while promoting nationalism or "traditional values" to justify opposition to certain rights, such as gender and LGBTQ+ equality.

1.3.1 Hungary

In Hungary, with its tendency to shift towards authoritarianism, the government maintains democratic structures such as elections but restricts essential freedoms, including press freedom and transparency (Zakaria, 1997). Media consolidation under government-friendly ownership restricts NGOs' ability to raise public awareness about sensitive child rights issues. Child rights advocacy is constrained by limited access to accurate public data on child welfare, making it difficult for organizations to create evidence-based programs (Freedom House, 2022). Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation (2023) publishes an annual report on child rights based on the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, each year, it faces increasing challenges in gathering data, with key information not only unavailable but often not collected by the government.

Partnerships with international organizations enable Hungarian NGOs to secure funding and gain visibility on a global stage, providing some insulation from domestic restrictions. However, recent legislation seeks to limit international funding options, citing the protection of national autonomy as justification. At the same time, the recently adopted legislation, also referred to as the "Státusztörvény" (status law) aims to restrict international funding opportunities under the pretext of protecting national sovereignty (Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2023).

1.3.2 Turkey

Experienced a complex trajectory, with periods of military rule and democracy. In recent years, it has shifted towards competitive authoritarianism, where democratic institutions exist but are undermined by the ruling party. Child rights advocates in Turkey face significant regulatory barriers, as NGOs are required to register with the government, and face the threat of shutdown if they oppose state policies (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Additionally, Turkey's state-controlled media limits coverage of child rights issues, making it challenging for advocates to raise awareness or generate public support (Keyman, 2017).

To operate in this restrictive environment, Turkish child rights organizations often partner with international bodies, leveraging external support to maintain their programs. By affiliating with groups such as UNICEF and Human Rights Watch, Turkish NGOs can access foreign funding and gain visibility on international platforms, which helps shield them from government interference (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004).

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child raised several concerns in its concluding observations in 2023. It emphasized the need for Turkey to ensure transparent and participatory budgeting, particularly in relation to children's rights, and recommended engaging in public dialogue, including with children, to improve accountability at the local government level. The Committee also called for systematic, mandatory, and ongoing training for a wide range of professionals - such as teachers, social workers, law enforcement, healthcare personnel, and those working in alternative care facilities - on children's rights. This includes raising awareness among children themselves about their rights, including remedies available under the Optional Protocol on a communications procedure.

Moreover, the Committee expressed deep concern about the increasingly difficult environment for civil society organizations working on children's rights, particularly after the

2016 coup attempt. The Committee strongly recommended that the government take immediate action to protect human rights defenders and ensure that journalists and NGOs can freely exercise their rights to freedom of expression and opinion without fear of intimidation or harassment.

Based on the country-specific overviews, several recommendations have already emerged, reflecting the varying contexts and challenges faced in advocating for children's rights. These initial insights provide a foundation for strategic guidance tailored to different democratic settings. However, the empirical data gathered through interviews and focus group discussions offers deeper, context-specific findings that enrich and expand upon these initial recommendations. By integrating these empirical observations, the report presents a more comprehensive set of strategies to enhance the effectiveness of child rights advocacy in diverse political environments, particularly in regions experiencing democratic backsliding or political instability.

For advocacy workers in politically restrictive environments like Turkey and Hungary, it is crucial to implement strategies that minimize the impact of government suppression. To enhance child rights advocacy in restrictive environments, organizations should collaborate with entities like UNICEF, Human Rights Watch, and local UN bodies to secure funding, visibility, and protection. Leveraging digital tools and encrypted platforms is crucial for raising awareness when traditional media is censored. Engaging local communities to document child rights violations through surveys, testimonies, and independent research can strengthen advocacy efforts. Establishing independent monitoring bodies or partnerships with international organizations ensures transparent reporting on child welfare, holding governments accountable. Engaging with bodies like the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child can apply international pressure to influence policy changes. Additionally, community-level awareness programs can build local support, while legal support networks can protect advocates from harassment or legal threats.

2. Findings from the qualitative research

2.1. What does advocacy mean for organizations that work with children?

The concept of advocacy remains unclear in Hungary and the region, (as noted in chapter 1) and this lack of clarity was reflected in the responses to our research questions. All respondents interpreted the question in relation to the focus of their activities. The responses covered a broad spectrum, highlighting both innovative practices and challenges in defining advocacy within a linguistic context that lacks a clear term. A range of approaches included launching communication campaigns on key topics, with an emphasis on education and raising awareness. In this context, it was emphasized that advocacy involves not only direct intervention but also the representation of children's interests in public and media spheres. Interviewees expressed that advocacy involves standing up for at-risk children, ensuring their voices are heard and their interests represented across various social spheres.

In many interpretations - especially among NGOs providing services to children - child participation and child-centeredness have emerged as a kind of synonym for advocacy. Representatives from NGOs serving specific groups of children have highlighted the challenge of interpreting children's rights within these groups, let alone achieving meaningful participation. They highlighted that advocacy requires education, which is a long process but a necessary element of it. In this context, it was stressed that raising children's awareness of their rights and working with families and educational institutions would also help to change the systemic factors affecting children's well-being. Among the related interpretations, NGOs providing services interpret advocacy as the best quality of service that could be provided to children. A small part of the responses included advocacy as a message towards decision-makers, but this was immediately accompanied by the 'utility' dimension of advocacy - or rather the lack of it. Many interviewees expressed a sense of futility and hopelessness in their attempts to influence decision-makers.

"By the way, advocacy is strongly associated with child-centredness in our organization. We try to structure, design, and operate all the services of the Foundation in a child-centered way, that is in the best interests of children and that takes into account the age-specific characteristics and needs of children." (NGO 2)

It is clear from the responses that the Hungarian language lacks a clear, widely accepted definition of advocacy to which organizations could relate and which would provide a common basis for effective advocacy in civil society. The absence of a clear definition of advocacy complicates achieving a shared understanding among decision-makers, NGOs, and the public. This is complicated by the fact that NGOs focused on children are engaged in a wide range of activities. There is overlap in their work with each other and the public institutional system, as well as isolation due to the limited nature of their capacities. Although the absence of a specific Hungarian equivalent for advocacy allows for flexibility in adapting methods to align with Hungarian cultural and social values, it is advisable to initiate a professional and in-depth dialogue with advocacy experts from various fields. This can help promote collaboration and lead to constructive solutions.

We also asked the representatives of the organizations about the implementation of children's rights in Hungary in the context of advocacy. Respondents agreed that the implementation of children's rights in Hungary is concerned, with a noticeable decline trend in recent years. Almost all respondents cited as examples the cases of infants left in hospital[3], which were leading in public discourse at the time of the interviews, and the case

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[3] Data from the Ministry of the Interior shows that in 2024, the number of infants who have been in childcare from birth but have remained in hospital due to overcrowding in alternative care could be between 280 and 300. This data is three times higher than a year earlier. (Source: https://index.hu/belfold/2024/09/24/csecsemo-gyermekjoleti-szolgalat-hatranyos-helyzet-korhaz/   , latest download: 2024.11.18)

of foundation schools closed before the start of the school year[4], which illustrate the systemic deficiencies and problems that result in significant violations of children's rights.

"Well, it's becoming increasingly difficult to be optimistic [about child protection]. For a long time, I think we've believed that the 1997 Child Protection Act is a very young piece of legislation that still needs to be put into practice. I thought for a very long time it would take time for it to become well-applied. What I am seeing now is that it is becoming more and more difficult to assert the rights of children or to protect our children. " (NGO 6)

"(...) I don't see this issue in a very positive light, the social network is not very organized and developed." (NGO 7)

A consensus emerged that the absence of a political will, along with systemic deficiencies and a lack of social commitment, were significant barriers to the fulfillment of children's rights.

"Well, I think it's the lack of intention [that hinders children's rights]. On the one hand, the lack of intention on the part of the state, and on the other hand, the social structure where active citizenship is at a very low level. So there are not masses of citizens stepping up in a way that forces the decision-maker to pay more attention to this issue." (NGO 2)

"I see government policy as a very serious problem. I think they have no idea that the resources they invest in children are good for society." (NGO 3)

Interviewees suggest that professional knowledge is available to improve the situation, but achieving this would require significant public commitment, as well as additional resources and financial investment.

2.2. How can the Hungarian NGO sector that focuses on children be described?

Our second main research question focused on mapping the segment of the Hungarian NGO sector that focuses on children. The interviewees highlighted the previously mentioned diversity among organizations and attempted to categorize them in different ways. One method of classification was by size, which allowed for an analysis of power relations, access to resources, and visibility.

"Well, I think it's diverse and colorful. On the one hand, this sector can be grouped by size: there are the big international organizations, there are the medium-sized ones, and there are the tiny organizations that are set up around a school or provide services for a specific target group." (NGO 2)

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[4] In a long-drawn-out procedure, the Government Office of Budapest decided days before the start of the school year that some institutions would not be allowed to start the school year, so children attending those institutions would have to continue their studies in other institutions. (Source: https://index.hu/belfold/2024/08/27/ivanyi-gabor-magyar-evangeliumi-testverkozosseg-met-iskola-ovo da/ latest download: 2024.11.18.)

Another common approach was classification by target groups. According to this, interviewees considered organizations that provide services directly to children to be distinct, with a separate group of organizations that focus on a specific group, e.g. disadvantaged or disabled children. Several respondents pointed out that many organizations often duplicate services for certain target groups due to the shortcomings of the state care system, which makes the state even less interested in providing services of an adequate standard.

"It's very easy to fall into the trap of working in parallel with public services because of the dysfunction of public services. I think few people are really critical of the existing system, few people who are truly independent, and few people who are truly children's rights-based work." (NGO 9)

The most prominent narrative in describing the NGO sector was that of shrinking opportunities and a shrinking space around organizations. Interviewees indicate that policies making NGOs less viable and the increasing politicization of child protection have created a primary challenge for most organizations which is survival. Many organizations cannot cope with this. Representatives of organizations observed that many smaller organizations, which previously ran valuable programs, have ceased to exist. Additionally, there are still many organizations that continue to operate but have had to significantly restructure their services or discontinue certain programs due to financial and operational challenges.

"The way I see it, space is shrinking, and NGOs prioritize survival. So obviously they can't expand, they are struggling for self-preservation. A lot of energy is needed to do that." (NGO 3)

"We are in a very difficult situation because we have noticed not only recently, but for years in fact, that the space around NGOs is shrinking. They are losing ground whether financially, because of the political climate, or because they are losing ground in the multiplication of practical problems. One can list quite a few organizations that have disappeared over the years." (NGO 5)

Interviewees spoke of an increasingly shrinking civic space, where organizations sometimes experience political and ideological attacks, either directly or indirectly. Therefore, the relationship to power is often reflected in the self-definition of organizations, but also in the general grouping of NGOs (for a detailed analysis of this, see chapter 2.3). Several interviewees emphasized the neutrality of their own organization. A modified logic of the 'three T's'[5] was used by many to describe the divisions between the NGOs. According to this there are 'attacked' (= támadott), 'tolerated' (= tűrt), and 'supported' (= támogatott) organizations.

"(...) because decisions are not really made according to professional criteria, but really according to this kind of centralized paradigm, so it's just people who are experts or have experiences who are in the way. I think that's why the government has a good working relationship with the same NGOs that are conveying their narrative." (NGO 2)

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[5] The "three T's" approach originated in the cultural policies of socialist regimes. It classifies artists and their works into three categories: "supported (=támogatott)," "tolerated (=tűrt)," and "prohibited (=tiltott)."

"This is a conscious effort and the government is clearly dividing NGOs. Those who try to somehow cooperate with the government because they hope to have a systemic effect are labeled as collaborators by radical organizations." (NGO 4)

Several interviewees reported that, in this politically and ideologically divided space, accepting state funding can lead to negative judgments. NGOs that provide direct services to children, and in particular those that run child protection institutions, are eligible for state funding; they may be accused of no longer being 'real' NGOs. In addition, an interviewee has reported that, although they seek to cooperate with certain actors and obtain normative funding through their institutions, they have received a clear message that they cannot receive grant funding from the government.

"Well, there was a time when I felt that these very civil NGOs who don't accept state funding don't accept us. So that we receive money from the government or we do public tasks, and then we are not completely civic." (NGO 3)

"(...) we cannot win a public grant. I know this because we've already approached a Tender Consultant Company to see if we'd forgotten to apply. And then they told us after their 3rd unsuccessful attempt that they had information that we would never win." (NGO 4)

There was a dissonance in the responses regarding the cooperation and the possible competition in the Hungarian NGO sector that focuses on children. This is not only a disagreement between the interviewees. There were also contradictions within a single interview, depending on the perspective from which the same interviewee approached the issue. The greatest agreement among respondents was that there is competition between NGOs for funding. However, all respondents emphasized that it was not a situation of heated hostility; rather, all organizations need to secure funding from the same source due to limited financial resources.

"Yes, there is definitely competition in terms of fundraising, because everyone has to get their slice of the same market. But it's not a corporate competition, so it's not like, out there in the corporate world. But there is certainly a kind of competition, because [organization X] also has to raise x million forints here, and [organization Y] also has to raise x million forints here. So there is definitely a competition in the direction of donors." (NGO 1)

In addition to the problem of an increasingly competitive climate for material resources, other - also competitive - situations were the subject of more mixed narratives in the interviews, which do not necessarily qualify the entry of new actors into a service area in a negative way. Responses indicated that it is inevitable that some areas or target groups will be left without services in which additional resources should be invested, given the reduced capacity of organizations. In such cases, it is not appropriate to talk about competition, but rather about reallocation of the area. At the same time, representatives of NGOs providing services also told stories where the implementation of a program was not complemented or supported by another NGO but hindered. According to them, these situations are partly the result of political divisions and partly the result of professional differences. In addition, competition for professionals and the acquisition of expertise was also raised in some interviews.

"Experience tells me that there is not [no competition]. Synergy can be created on professional issues, but you have to create the conditions. Otherwise, there is competition in other areas, absolutely. Organizations are obviously afraid of their know-how (...) the experience they have accumulated over ten or twenty years." (NGO 3)

The picture of cooperation was also mixed. Several interviewees reported that, although cooperation between NGOs exists in principle, it is difficult to keep it alive in practice because it would require extra capacity (which is not available from scarce resources).

"Well, I think cooperation also depends on resources and time. The existing cooperation is more in principle, so we know about each other and we invite each other to our events. More concrete cooperation depends on resources or projects. " (NGO 2)

Difficulties in the functioning of NGOs, divisions and serious systemic problems in child protection lead to both conflict and increased cooperation. In this context, accepting state funding and the relationship with the government creates tensions among certain organizations, making collaboration challenging. Conversely, for others, it encourages teamwork and the development of supportive communities. At the same time, this polarization is increasingly being unraveled by the worsening situation of child protection. Interviewees' reports indicate that a significant shortage of financial and human resources coupled with high-profile scandals impacting child protection, has prompted all stakeholders to collaborate for the benefit of children.

"We tend to feel (...) that there are NGOs that are reluctant to work with us or do not recognize the activities of our organization. We regret it. I always say that I don't really see the reason why they should be angry with the [...] organization." (NGO 6)

"There is absolutely [cooperation between NGOs]. We see how the space for NGOs in Hungary is shrinking (...) so we have been thematizing for years how we are under attack. In recent years, we have not only tried to protect ourselves from new attacks, but we have also tried to support the much smaller NGOs around us, even by giving advice on what to be really scared of, what not to be scared of" (NGO 5)

"I think that the current difficult situation will trigger a stronger unity and a stronger stand, which will be implemented on a practical level. What I see is that we as an organization that is working in the field, are actually trying to reach out to those who are alive and moving and organized, trying to work together or collaborate to promote children's rights." (NGO 6)

Concerning cooperation, interviewees also raised the issue of umbrella organizations. Several interviewees welcomed the increasing activity of the Child Rights NGO Coalition. They emphasized the importance of emerging coordination on specific issues and the existence of a platform to advocate for professional values related to significant matters affecting children. In addition to the positive results, they criticized the fact that advocacy is currently one-sided since it is mainly resolutions on professional issues that are adopted, and therefore some organizations find it more difficult to engage in this work. Some interviewees also questioned the effectiveness of this work and raised the possibility of broadening the range of tools, e.g. raising awareness of child protection through films or other artistic forms. There was also a call for an umbrella organization or professional platform, not only for NGOs but also for all public and civil actors working with children.

2.3 Relationship between the state and civil society

The interviewees agreed that the relationship between the state and civil society is currently strained and that the legal and ideological framework is not supportive of the operation of NGOs. The unfavorable legal environment is not only shaped by the creation of a single norm that puts NGOs at a disadvantage (e.g. the Stop Soros Act of 2018, which was declared unlawful by the EU Court of Justice in 2020) but also by the rapidly changing, unpredictable legal environment. Representatives of several organizations described the state's approach to NGOs using the framework of "tolerated" and "supported" mentioned above. Most participants also defined their own organizations' relationship with the state along this scale. Interviews revealed that these organizations adopt different strategies to navigate within these frameworks. Some organizations emphasize "neutrality," highlighting the professional aspects of their work, while others view "invisibility" as an effective strategy. Contrary, some NGOs saw publicity as the key to survival.

"The state articulates a centralized existence as the optimal idea. It is neither favorable to individual responsibility nor individual ideas. Whereas NGOs start from the premise that there is one individual or several individuals who come together for a common goal and say, we'll do this, and then they create an organization for that. But this is completely at odds with the centralized worldview that is presented as the optimal idea on the side of the state." (NGO 2)

"(...) the government is doing everything it can to smear NGOs and squeeze out those who do not support their narratives. This is clear. And some of the NGOs that are supported are those that fit into the mainstream" (NGO 4)

"Well, I think it's very clear how the public bodies are very consciously trying to make the civil sector impossible. This is evident in the laws being enacted. Year after year, new laws, regulations, and legislative acts have a harmful impact on NGOs. Additionally, some campaigns and narratives use hate speech to foster negative sentiments towards NGOs." (NGO 5)

"I can tell you that this is a messy story. I don't think we have an NGO-friendly legislative background now. If I look at tax policy, for example, it's not." (NGO 6)

TURKEY: The proposed "agents of influence" law in Türkiye targets individuals and organizations receiving foreign support or engaging in activities aligned with "foreign interests," labeling them as "agents of influence." This law would severely limit advocacy by imposing restrictions and criminal penalties on NGOs, activists, and journalists involved in human rights work. The law's vague language allows for broad interpretation, increasing the risk of arbitrary enforcement against civil society groups, potentially silencing voices critical of the government and stifling freedom of expression and association.

Even though this proposal was withdrawn by the Turkish government, similar legislations have been introduced in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. In Slovakia, the proposed bill

would require organizations receiving over €5,000 annually from foreign sources - including funds channeled through national NGOs with foreign support - to declare themselves as "foreign-funded organizations" (FFOs).

There was also a consensus among interviewees that the state does not see NGOs as partners. Representatives from organizations that have direct contact with public bodies reported that while cooperation is possible, it often appears to be superficial. Currently, there is a lack of meaningful advocacy with the government. Many believe that if a case can be made for social commitment, positive results could be achieved.

"In some ways yes, in some ways no [public bodies take into account their view]. I see that everything is going terribly slowly. Our approach is to first implement a model and then propose legislative changes based on that model. I say that we see partial results. Very small and very slow partial results." (NGO 6)

"I think there is no relationship, at least not a partnership. There are obviously NGOs that have been specifically attacked by the government. We're not on that list, but our relationship is also very interesting and completely unpredictable. So, while it's not necessarily a problem to get an appointment with the ministry and have them listen to what we have to say, it probably doesn't make much sense in most cases." (NGO 1)

For NGOs, cooperation with the public sector primarily involves partnerships with local organizations that have a public service mission. In these cooperation, NGOs aim to foster positive relationships and often succeed in establishing strong professional connections. At the same time, politically motivated local attacks, such as making events impossible or making it difficult to operate, often have to be dealt with at the local level.

"Well, in terms of local cooperation, we have managed over the years to work together without any particular conflict. This means that professional links are strong, but it does not mean political support." (NGO 4)

2.4 How predictable is the maintenance and operation of NGOs in a shrinking political space?

The fourth research question focused on the sustainability of NGOs. The majority of interviewees felt they could maintain stable operations for now, but the situation appeared less predictable in the medium to long term. It was clear from the interviewees' accounts that the majority of them have now restructured their operations to be less exposed to a single source of income. Organizations that have not yet addressed these issues are actively working on them. The interviews revealed that organizations experiencing greater financial insecurity tend to be those that rely heavily on EU funding through the government. In terms of predictability, policy decisions that indirectly limit NGOs' access to certain resources are particularly challenging for them.

Representatives from all organizations expressed concern over the current worsening economic situation, which poses a risk of significantly reducing donations from both individuals and companies. Fundraising demands a considerable investment of resources from all organizations. In this context, it is important to emphasize the competition for donors, as previously discussed. In a declining economic climate, any reduction in funding will further restrict the capabilities of NGOs.

"I think at the moment we have a predictable way of maintaining our organization. So, that's what we've achieved, that I think there's very professional planning and management, increasingly professional. And in that sense, we are anticipating." (NGO 3)

"I view fundraising as requiring significant resources; it's one of our largest teams and needs substantial human resources." (NGO 1)

Regarding funding, the issue of public resources needs to be addressed. Interviews reveal that state resources have become increasingly unpredictable in recent times, exacerbating the challenges faced by NGOs that rely on this support. Furthermore, in a context of shrinking and divided spaces, the acceptance of state funding creates tensions between organizations. This undermines sustainable cooperation and ultimately hinders advocacy efforts that focus on children's rights.

In the context of sustainability, it is important to highlight the constantly changing legislative environment. Organizations must invest significant resources to continuously adapt their programs and services to remain compliant with current laws. This pressure to adjust can undermine the quality of services provided and divert resources and attention away from meaningful advocacy activities. Consequently, not only are the rights of NGOs violated, but also the rights of children.

"We are constantly working on this. One of our programs had to be completely redesigned. (…) We needed to do this due to new legislation." (NGO 1)

From a sustainability perspective, it is important to address human resource issues. Historically, the NGOs have struggled to compete with the private sector in terms of salaries. This challenge has intensified in recent years as economic conditions have worsened, causing the civil society sector to fall further behind. Providing quality services and effective advocacy requires a significant number of highly skilled professionals. However, the sector is currently unable to offer competitive salaries, jeopardizing the sustainability of its activities.

In this environment, all interviewees expressed a desire for security and predictability. In addition to their professional responsibilities, the interviewees highlighted the importance of predictability and fair salaries within their organizations. They expressed a need for a clear and transparent legal framework that outlines distinct roles and responsibilities for child protection, as this would significantly enhance predictability.

In summary, a well-defined structure for NGOs is necessary to enable effective advocacy on behalf of children. However, such a framework is currently lacking in Hungary. Furthermore, many of the issues raised by NGOs regarding their operations—such as a lack of predictability and transparency, state overreach, and non-professional policy decisions—are not unique to this sector.

3. Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed based on comprehensive qualitative research, including interviews with child advocacy professionals, as well as an analysis of legal frameworks, soft regulations, and the evolving political landscape across multiple countries. These recommendations are intended to guide NGOs and stakeholders in navigating the increasingly restrictive environments that hinder effective child rights advocacy. By integrating insights from both the Hungarian context and broader regional trends, these strategies aim to strengthen the resilience and impact of organizations working in challenging democratic conditions. The goal is to offer practical solutions that can be adapted to diverse national contexts, supporting NGOs in their mission to protect children's rights despite ongoing pressures.

3.1 Recommendations based on desk research findings and interviews with a donor organization

The following set of recommendations derived from a thorough analysis of desk research findings and insights gathered from a focus group discussion with a donor organization that provides grants in the CEE region.

Foster resilience through coalition-building and role sharing

Forming strong coalitions among NGOs can amplify advocacy efforts while reducing individual organizational risks. By dividing roles and responsibilities—such as delegating tasks related to communication, campaigning, and research—NGOs can maintain a sustainable advocacy effort even in a hostile environment. Sharing tasks also helps prevent burnout and allows organizations to leverage their collective strengths.

The research findings confirmed that networking processes in Hungary have been initiated (and strengthened) through both formal and informal channels. The Civil Coalition for Children's Rights, which is the largest formal umbrella organization, is becoming increasingly visible and active. However, it seems that its activities related to advocacy lobbying and stakeholder engagement have not yet broken through the glass ceiling separating sectoral governance and civil society. Another issue is that only a small group of the Coalition's members are actively involved (signing statements, contributing to discussions), while the majority remain in a more observational and passive role. As a result, collaboration among members and the Coalition's advocacy capabilities are also limited. Despite these challenges, the existence and work of the Coalition remain an important part of children's rights advocacy in Hungary.

Prioritize mental health and emotional support for advocacy workers

Given the stress and risks associated with working in environments where democracy is shrinking, integrating mental health support into NGO projects is crucial. Providing psychological counseling, peer support, and supervision can help sustain motivation, prevent

burnout, and ensure the longevity of advocacy efforts. Organizing retreats, workshops, or summer schools can also serve as re-energizing spaces for activists.

Diversify funding sources and maintain financial flexibility

To reduce vulnerability to government attacks on funding sources, NGOs should diversify their income streams. This includes seeking alternative funding from international donors, private sector partnerships, and individual supporters. Developing a financial strategy that includes emergency funds or flexible funding arrangements can help NGOs maintain stability during periods of increased pressure.

When it comes to diversifying resources, it is essential to assess the opportunities for fundraising within the private sector. Based on the World Giving Index (WGI) and the Global Philanthropy Environment Index (GPEI)[6], Hungary ranks last in the region in terms of the political and economic environment for philanthropy and the associated legal framework. On a five-point scale, the global average is 3.63, while Hungary's overall score is 3.14, falling below average on all six criteria, both regionally and compared to the Balkans. Notably, in terms of the sociocultural environment—which includes the cultural tradition of philanthropy, public trust, awareness of philanthropy, and the perception of NGOs—Hungary ranks at the bottom both in Eastern Europe and globally. The global average score is 3.38, the Eastern European average is 3.29, and Hungary scores just 3.00. Hungary also lags behind the regional average in attitudes toward donations and volunteering. According to a study by the Social Impact Alliance for Central & Eastern Europe (V4)[7], Hungary has the lowest rate of donations to NGOs, at 36%, compared to the V4 average of 46% and Poland's standout 51%. In Hungary, the highest proportion of people donate only once a year (53%), whereas the V4 average is 41%, indicating that donations in other countries are more regular. Among V4 countries, Hungary has the highest expectation for corporate social responsibility, but Hungarian citizens are the least willing to pay more for socially responsible products and services: 38%, compared to the V4 average of 44%. Similarly, Hungary shows the least openness to workplace volunteering, with 27% participation compared to the V4 average of 39%.[8]

Understanding these figures, ratios, and trends is crucial for realistically planning resource diversification to achieve effective advocacy for children's rights.

Adapt advocacy tactics to the political climate

In challenging political environments, NGOs should remain flexible and creative with their advocacy strategies. This may involve working clandestinely, engaging in grassroots

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[6] The GPEI evaluates a country's philanthropic environment based on six criteria: the ease of NGO operations, tax incentives, cross-border giving, and the political, economic, and sociocultural context. This score reflects the general context and conditions for philanthropy in a given country, detailing the environment in which it operates.

[7] V4 = Visegrad Four: Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland

[8] The referenced data is from Veronika Pistyur's article titled *"Why is it cooler to show off than to give?"* (Forbes, 2024, manuscript).

mobilization, or finding allies within government institutions. Identifying influential figures or sympathizers within the political landscape and leveraging their support can be effective. It's also crucial to maintain dialogue with various political actors, even those who may initially seem uncooperative.

Focus on building trust and community engagement

Advocacy is ultimately about connecting with people. In contexts where there is fear or reluctance to join advocacy efforts, NGOs must focus on building trust within communities. This includes being sensitive to the risks faced by individuals and their families, creating safe spaces for dialogue, and recognizing the importance of solidarity. By cultivating strong, supportive communities, NGOs can foster long-term engagement and increase their influence on policy changes.

3.2 Recommendations based on interviews with experts

Part of this research, experts dealing with the problem of shrinking democracy at a theoretical level were also interviewed to highlight the growing challenges faced by NGOs due to shrinking democratic spaces (also within the ECPAT network). These discussions revolved around how governments, using tools like fake news, have increasingly restricted civic spaces, influenced by trends such as counter-globalization and localization. NGOs are now forced to rethink their advocacy strategies to navigate these politically hostile environments.

Key themes include the need for NGOs to adapt to rapid changes in political climates, adopt non-confrontational approaches, and focus on being flexible and localized in their efforts. The interviews also emphasize the importance of securing IT infrastructure, legal support, and psychological well-being for NGO staff. Moreover, NGOs should evolve their business models to gain financial independence and reduce reliance on external donors, which often come with restrictive conditions.

Adopt a non-confrontational, flexible advocacy approach

In politically hostile environments, NGOs should avoid aggressive tactics. Instead, prioritize dialogue and collaboration to influence advocacy changes. Recognize that being overly confrontational can result in being excluded from government discussions or labeled as foreign agents.

Strengthen IT security and data protection

NGOs must invest in robust IT infrastructure to ensure safe communication and data protection. Regularly update passwords, use secure apps, and train staff on digital security to mitigate risks. Maintaining data privacy is crucial, especially in environments where governments may monitor NGO activities.

Prioritize legal and psychological support for staff

Ensure that NGOs have access to legal assistance to protect against potential lawsuits and government harassment. Additionally, offer psychological support and counseling to prevent

burnout and maintain staff morale in high-pressure environments. This includes having in-house psychologists or access to mental health professionals who understand the local context.

It is essential to emphasize that the importance of mental health for individuals working within civil society organizations was a consistent theme throughout the research. This finding underscores the particularly distressing reality that, in the CEE region, there is currently a severe shortage of financial resources, grants, and other forms of support dedicated to addressing mental health needs in the sector. The lack of accessible funding in this area highlights a critical gap that, if not addressed, may significantly undermine the sustainability and effectiveness of civil society efforts in challenging political environments.

Increase financial independence

To reduce reliance on international donors and mitigate financial instability, NGOs should explore diverse funding sources, including local fundraising, partnerships with socially conscious businesses, and developing sustainable revenue streams. This independence allows NGOs to maintain focus on their missions without donor-imposed limitations.

Regarding financial independence, there's a kind of catch-22: in the initial stages, developing a fundraising strategy requires additional resources, which means that an organization already in a financially vulnerable position may not be able to allocate funding for this purpose. Competition among civil society organizations is inevitable, as there are only a limited number of companies and private donors available. Furthermore, in the Eastern European region, the culture of philanthropy is generally quite underdeveloped, so achieving financial independence often leads to conflicts among organizations.

In the short term, this carries the risk that organizations, which view each other as competitors in the realm of fundraising and grant applications, may experience a deterioration in their relationships. This, in turn, could hinder their ability to collaborate on professional issues.

It is likely that by limiting resources, allocating them based on ideological grounds, and stigmatizing access to foreign funds, governments engaging in such practices aim precisely for this outcome: to polarize the sector and narrow the possibilities for professional cooperation.

Develop a strategic, solution-focused mindset

Encourage NGOs to shift from a problem-focused approach to a solution-focused mindset. By identifying what works and adapting to changing political landscapes, NGOs can remain effective. Engage in scenario planning to anticipate future challenges, and focus on creating resilient organizational structures that can withstand political shifts.

3.3 Recommendations based on the research on advocacy for child-focused organizations

Establish a clear definition of advocacy in the local context

To address the ambiguity surrounding the concept of advocacy in the Hungarian context, especially among child-focused organizations, there is a need for a universally accepted definition. This would create a shared foundation for effective collaboration across the civil sector. Developing a comprehensive definition would also help organizations align their strategies and approaches, ensuring more consistent advocacy efforts for children's rights.

This concept needs to be broad enough to encompass both individual rights advocacy (through direct service provision), such as ensuring child participation, as well as general advocacy efforts (e.g., lobbying).

Invest in education and awareness campaigns to promote children's rights

Given the difficulty in understanding and promoting children's rights, especially among disadvantaged or marginalized groups, it is crucial to prioritize educational initiatives. These campaigns should be long-term and focus on raising awareness not only among children but also among families, institutions, and society at large. Empowering communities with knowledge about children's rights can foster greater support and engagement in advocacy efforts.

Leverage collaborative networks to enhance impact

In an increasingly restrictive political environment, NGOs should strengthen networks and coalitions to pool resources, share best practices, and amplify their voices. While collaboration may not entirely shield organizations from political pressures, it can enhance their visibility and influence. Creating alliances with other organizations, both national and international, can also provide a safety net, especially in advocacy work that involves systemic challenges.

Focus on service delivery as an advocacy tool

For organizations that directly serve children, providing high-quality, child-centered services can itself be a form of advocacy. By demonstrating effective and impactful service delivery, NGOs can highlight systemic gaps and advocate for policy changes. This approach aligns with the need for practical, evidence-based advocacy that focuses on tangible outcomes for children's well-being.

Adapt advocacy strategies to navigate political pressures

In the current political climate, where NGOs are often viewed with suspicion, it is essential to adopt non-confrontational and pragmatic advocacy methods. Engaging in constructive dialogue with decision-makers while maintaining organizational independence can open channels for collaboration without risking the organization's credibility. Additionally, avoiding overtly political stances can help maintain access to critical resources and partnerships.

Summary

The research examined the advocacy challenges and strategies of civil organizations working with children in the context of shrinking democratic spaces in Hungary and Central and Eastern Europe. The findings reveal that advocacy organizations in Hungary face

significant obstacles, with even the ambiguity of the term "advocacy" in the local context complicating unified action. The lack of a clear, commonly accepted definition leads to various interpretations among organizations, making coherent action and collaboration more difficult. Many civil organizations interpret advocacy from a service provision perspective, primarily focusing on educational and awareness-raising campaigns aimed at sensitizing the public and institutions to children's rights. Others associate the concept with practical assistance and the advocacy related to it. However, regardless of how a given organization defines advocacy, most encounter some form of systemic resistance and a lack of political will in their professional work, which reduces their effectiveness.

One recurring theme in the research was the political pressure on civil organizations. They are increasingly constrained by stricter regulations, financial limitations, and social apathy, forcing them to focus on survival rather than expansion. The research highlights that, in this politically unstable environment, adopting conflict-avoidant strategies and building collaborative networks is essential for sustaining advocacy activities. However, reliance on coalitions alone may not guarantee protection for organizations, as the Hungarian example demonstrates.

Diversifying income sources could provide a solution for organizations' operations, but in the current highly vulnerable operating environment, this does not guarantee predictability.

Organizations focusing on children are in a unique situation in Hungary. They must contend with challenges posed by anti-democratic changes seen internationally, while also facing the increasingly difficult conditions of the Hungarian child protection system. Deep, systemic issues are emerging, where even civil commitment through parallel service provision can only offer partial solutions to specific problems. The research identified tendencies indicating that deeply rooted problems, coupled with political and ideological attacks, are pushing divided organizations toward greater collaboration.

Key recommendations include developing a clear, localized definition of advocacy to promote unified action within the sector, investing in long-term educational and awareness-raising initiatives to enhance public understanding of children's rights, and leveraging high-quality service delivery as a tool for advocacy. Additionally, strengthening digital security, legal protection, and psychological support for staff is essential to maintaining the operational resilience of civil organizations. Finally, fostering financial independence from both state and international donors enhances autonomy, allowing organizations to carry out their missions more freely even in an increasingly restrictive environment. This multifaceted approach is crucial for organizations to adapt to the changing political climate while protecting the rights of children and the vulnerable professional groups responsible for their care.

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Use of ChatGPT in the research report

In compiling this research report, the researchers utilized ChatGPT as a digital tool to assist in various analytical and research tasks, adhering to current AI standards. Specifically, ChatGPT was instrumental in summarizing and synthesizing lengthy texts, ensuring concise and coherent outputs that fit the needs of the report. It was also used for correcting language errors and refining drafts, enhancing the clarity and readability of the content. Additionally, the researchers employed ChatGPT to conduct exploratory inquiries, such as identifying existing studies on the democratic status of specific countries, determining the presence of child rights ombudsmen, and finding translations of advocacy-related terms in various languages.

Moreover, ChatGPT 40 was used to analyze political regime shifts in selected countries based on existing models, such as the framework outlined on the "Post-Communist Regimes" website. This involved examining transitions from closed authoritarian regimes to other forms of governance, categorizing countries like Hungary, Bulgaria, Turkey, and others into distinct political trajectories. By leveraging ChatGPT's capabilities, the researchers were able to efficiently process and organize data, enabling a more systematic approach to identifying patterns in the democratization processes of these nations.